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AN OLD MAN'S PRAYER.







AN OLD MAN'S PRAYER.

BY
✓
GEORGE M. BAKER.



ILLUSTRATED BY HAMMATT BILLINGS.

84
BOSTON:
LEE AND SHEPARD.
1868.

↑

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BOSTON:

Stereotyped and Printed by Geo. C. Rand & Avery.

TO
MY WIFE.

THIS simple story will be recognized by many throughout New England to whom the author has had the pleasure of reciting it. Frequent requests that he would place it in shape for preservation have emboldened him to issue it in its present dress. Painfully conscious of its defects as a literary work, he sends it forth in search of old acquaintances, trusting it may receive a share of that kindly favor bestowed upon it as it fell from his lips.

ILLUSTRATIONS.

Designed by Hammatt Billings. Engraved by S. S. Kilburn.

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AN OLD MAN'S PRAYER.

IN the loftiest room, of princely state,
Of a modern palace grand and great, —
Whose marble front is a symbol true
Of the inner splendors hid from view, —
On an autumn night, when wild without
The bold winds held their revel rout,
Rudely assailing the passing throng,
Through churchyards creeping with mournful song,

An Old Man's Prayer.

A group was gathered around a board
Heaped with all that wealth could afford,
Or taste could suggest : dishes costly and rare,
Fruits of all climes and all seasons, were there.
The pendent lights in brilliance danced
On the gleaming plate their rays enhanced ;
The massive mirrors thrice displayed
The stately banquet there arrayed.
Furniture carved by an artist hand,
Carpets which only great wealth could command,
Curtains of damask, of lace, and of gold,
Spoke of the splendors wealth could unfold,
And filled with a joy and a pleasure rare
The youthful hearts that were gathered there.

An Old Man's Prayer.

Slender each form, and fair each face,
Of the twelve gay lads which that table grace,
As with genial talk and pleasant jest
They banter each other, and cheer their guest.
For one guest is there, as youthful as they,
With a heart as light, and a voice as gay,
Who laughs at their jests with ready glee,
And whose quick returns speak a spirit free,—
An honored guest ; for, on the morrow,
They must part with him in pain and sorrow.
The glittering emblems his shoulders bear
Bid him for strife and for peril prepare ;
Bid him go forth at his Country's call,
With her banner to triumph, or on it to fall.

An Old Man's Prayer.

A moment's pause, as with ready hand
The waiter hurries, at command,
To clear the table, and, instead
Of the rich, choice viands thickly spread,
Ranges dark bottles and cruses, which show
Marks of long years in damp vaults below.
The richest juices age can display
Are quickly spread in tempting array.
Wines of Bordeaux and Seville are there,
With liquors and cordials sparkling and rare ;
And bottles are opened, and glasses are filled.
When all in a moment the tumult is stilled,
As he who presides with dignified grace
High raises his goblet, and stands in his place :—



An Old Man's Prayer.

"I give you, friends, no warrior's name
Your hearts to thrill, your blood to flame;
No toast to beauty shall my lips repeat,
Where we to-night in sacred friendship meet
To part with one, who, in our boyhood's days,
Earnest and true, won all our love and praise;
Who, on the morrow, plays the hero's part,
And seeks the battle with a loyal heart.
His health I give with an earnest prayer,
That, while on his mission of peril and care,
Success may be his, and, by deeds renowned,
He may meet us again with laurels crowned."
All glasses are raised, when a gentle hand
Is heard at the door—all silent stand.





An Old Man's Prayer.

As it slowly opens, and into the light
An old man steps, his features bright :
The long white hairs o'er his shoulders stream ;
Like silver threads in the warm rays beam.
Wrinkled his brow, and pale his face,
Wasted his form, and tottering his pace,
Shrunk his cheek ; but the eye above
Tells of gentleness, kindness, love.
And silent stand all as he slowly seeks
A place near the table, and gently speaks :—

“ Young men, but a moment I check your mirth,
And bring you back to the common earth.
Unbidden I come with an old man's prayer :



An Old Man's Prayer.

May it seek your hearts, and gain entrance
there !

Look on my face, seamed, not with crime,
But with marks of age before their time :
These long white hairs should not have shown
Till ten more years had by me flown.
Age is upon me ; not age by years,
But age by sorrow and care and tears ;
Not age that cheers as it draweth near
Yon heaven which seemeth more bright and clear,
But age which causes the heart to lag
In its onward course, and the spirit to flag ;
That prays for death as but a release
From earthly care, and finds no peace



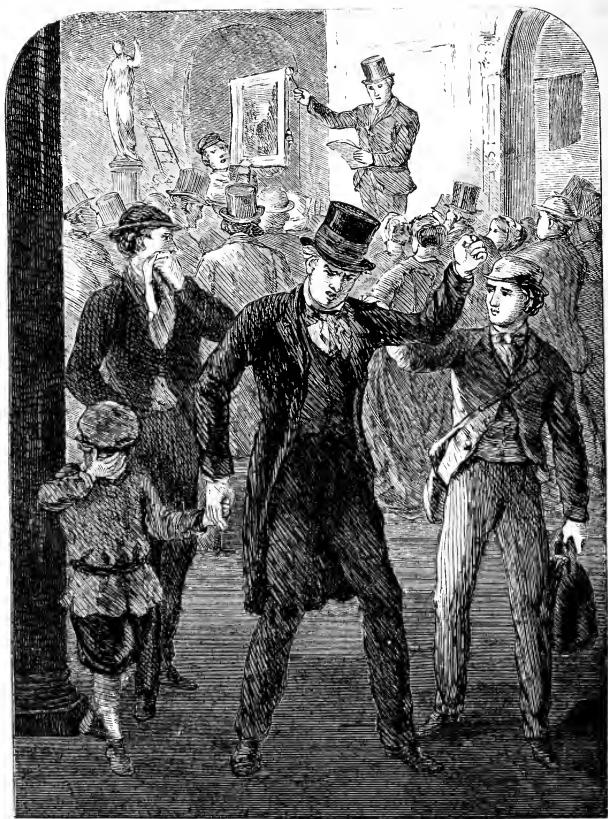


An Old Man's Prayer.

In that sweet belief that at last I hail, —
‘There is rest for the weary beyond the vale.’
For to me has come a spirit of light,
Bringing the morning, and chasing the night ;
Causing my heart with joy to swell
To my Maker, ‘who doeth all things well.’
You shall hear my story : ’twill not be long,
And may guard you all from sin and from wrong.
I had wealth and plenty in goodly lands,
In houses and cattle ; and from my hands
Many were fed ; and many were they
Who partook of my charity day by day.
My house was open to stranger and friend ;
And my gold did I lavishly, freely spend.



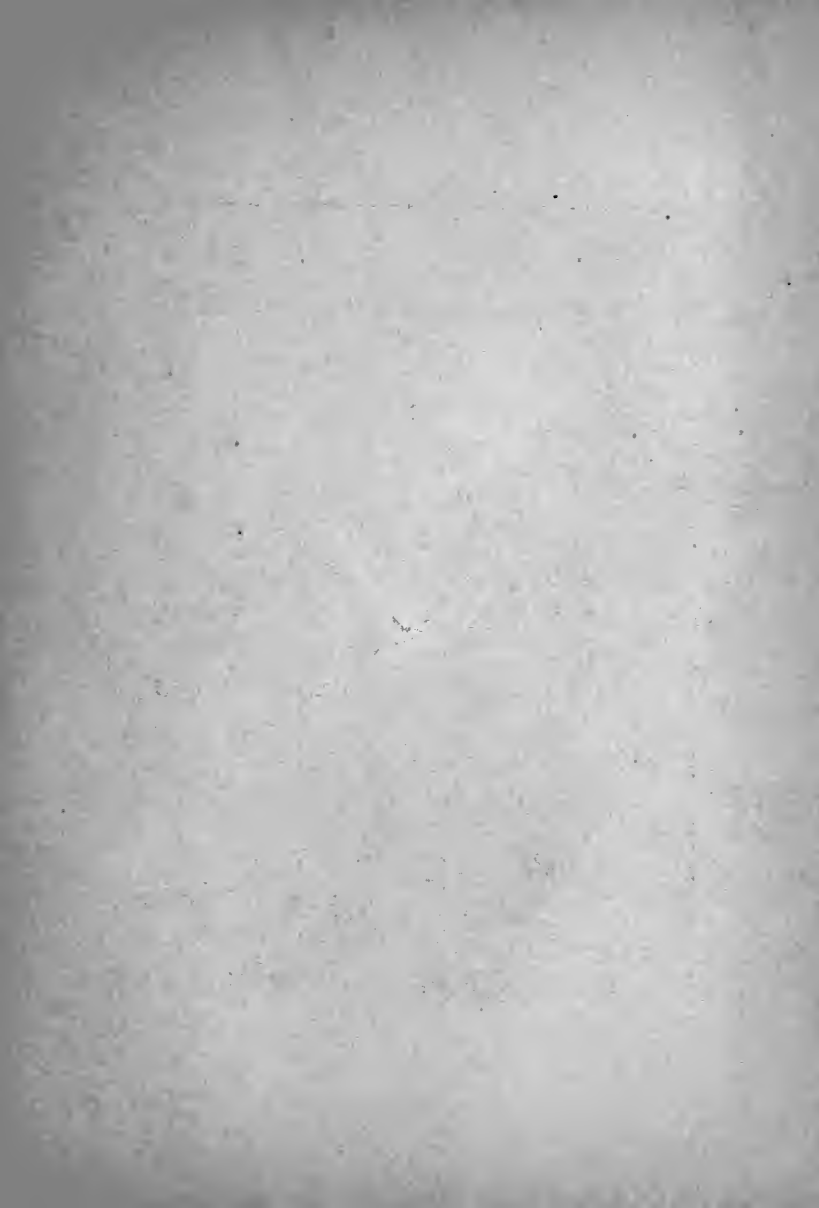




An Old Man's Prayer.

But one bitter curse did my wealth uprear
To poison my life, — the tempter here,
The sparkling demon, which now I see
From all your glasses glaring on me, —
A monster who steals on its prey so slow,
That it has your life before you know
Or dream of its power: this was the curse
That sat at my fire-side, robbed my purse,
Poisoned my life, and left me to be
A drifting log on the world's wide sea,
Ruined and bankrupt, lost and bereft;
No kindred, no fortune, no treasure, left.
Treasure! — yes; for I had three sons,
The hope of my life, — three noble ones.







An Old Man's Prayer.

You shall hear their fate, and then I'll away,
Nor longer your hour of pleasure delay.

One sought as a merchant hopeful to clear
Our tarnished name, to again uprear
Our shattered house ; but, sad to say,
The curse of the wine-cup was in his way.
He seized on it madly, drank deep and fast,
And sank to the drunkard's grave at last.

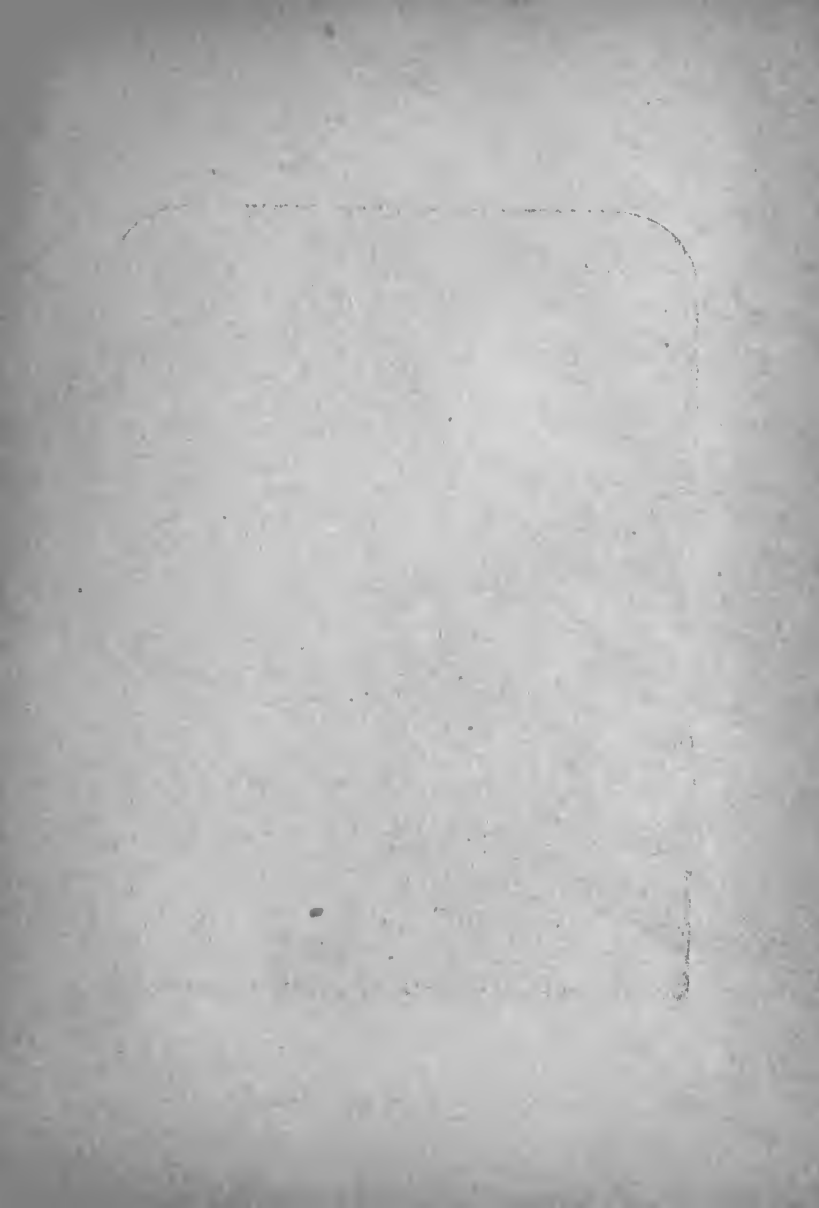
I stood by his side as with frenzy wild
He cursed himself and his wife and child ;
He cursed me too, as the one who had
 led

His feet in the path that drunkards tread ;

An Old Man's Prayer.

And then — it was worse than all beside —
He cursed his Maker ; and then — he died !

Another, with spirit that loved to brave,
Sought a bold, free life on the ocean-wave.
He left my side full of life and health,
In a good stanch ship, in search of wealth.
A twelvemonth passed, and day by day
I scanned for his sail the distant bay.
At last I saw it, and eagerly flew
To welcome my boy so manly and true.
But, alas ! he was gone : no son to greet
My waiting heart came with eager feet.
But they told me there, — one stormy night,





An Old Man's Prayer.

When the heavens were filled with angry light,
The waves rolled high, and the winds beat wild,
That out on a frail yard went my child ;
He had drunk deep, and 'twas fearful to sweep
On that slender spar o'er the seething deep ;
That one heavy sea tossed the ship like a toy,
And hurled from his hold my darling boy.
Then I sank me down in agony wild,
And glared on the waves that rolled over my child :
I gazed until in the waters blue
I saw reflected the brilliant hue
Of one lone star, which, high above,
Seemed to speak to my heart of faith and love ;
And I thought, as I turned my eyes to its light.



An Old Man's Prayer.

It beckoned me on to the heavens so bright,
Where I know, whenever this life shall cease,
I shall meet my boy in eternal peace.

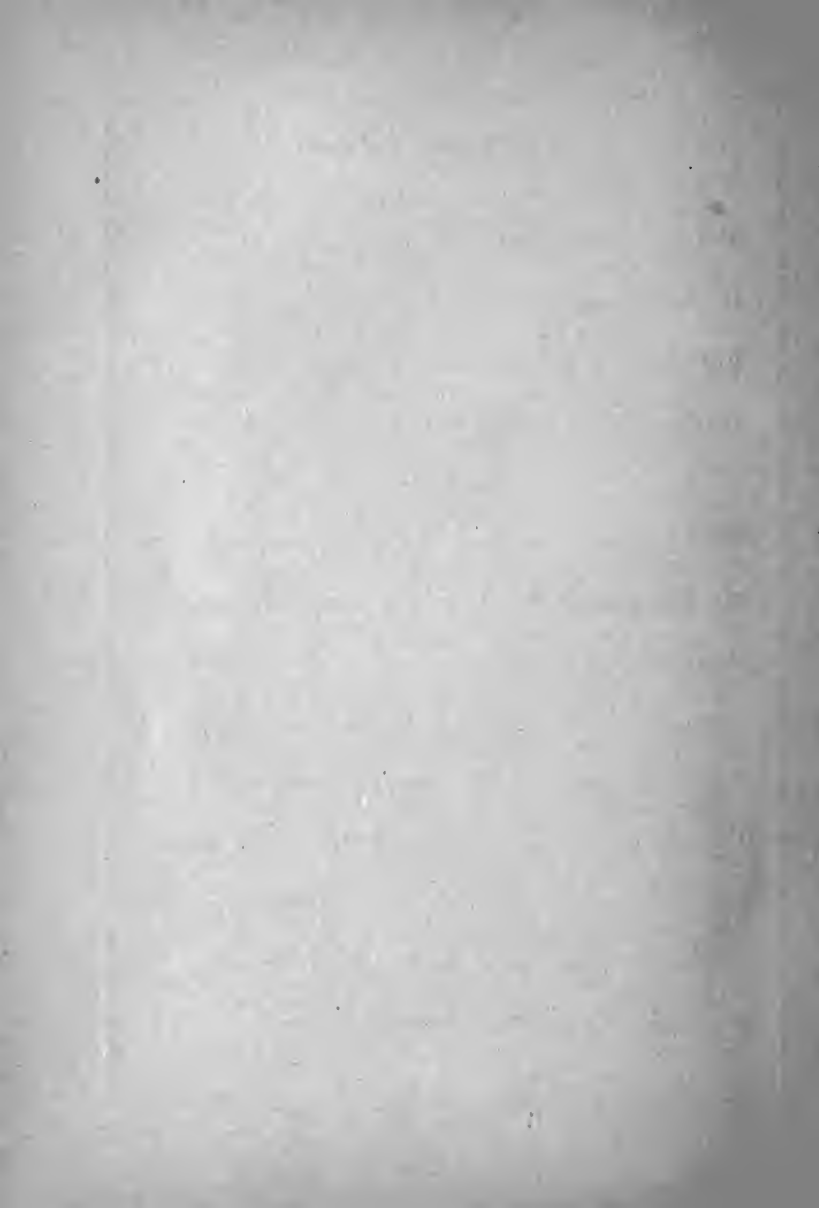
I had but one left ; and him I taught
To shun each sinful word and thought ;
To beware of the wine-cup's demon lure,
That would steel his heart, and his soul obscure.
He took the way of life that leads
To the sacred desk where the preacher pleads,
And placed his foot on the pulpit stair,
The gospel — banner of life — to bear.
When the cannon's boom o'er Sumter broke,
And the air was filled with traitorous smoke ;





An Old Man's Prayer.

When brave men sprang with willing hearts
To their Country's flag to repel the darts
Which treason had hurled with malice wild
At the life of the mother, so good and mild,—
My boy stepped down from the preacher's stand,
And started forth, with life in hand,
To sell it dear, but to battle strong
With the loyal North against fearful wrong.
I know that he carries a magic spell
'Gainst the curse of our race to guard him well;
And I know, should he fall, his death will be
In the foremost ranks of loyalty.
And now, young men, an old man's prayer:—
Leave the bright wine in your glasses there;



An Old Man's Prayer.

Shun its allurements ; for in its deep red
Is the blood of its victims dying and dead.
Fill up your glasses, and pledge your friend
In the crystal stream that Heaven doth send."

With a lowly bow, and the same meek air,
He has passed the door, and adown the stair ;
While those he has left to their leader turn
With downcast eyes, and cheeks that burn.
Silent he stands as his glass he takes,
When the guest of the evening the silence breaks.
" Friends of my boyhood, the old man's prayer
Shall meet a response in the heart I wear.
I come to-night from a mother's side :



An Old Man's Prayer.

She watches my life with a parent's pride ;
And I know 'tis the dearest wish of her heart,
In camp and in battle to keep me apart
From sin and temptation ; unceasing will pray
Heaven's blessing to guard on my perilous way.
And this pledge will I leave her, — never again
My lips with the wine-cup's poison to stain.
So, friends, let's drink to our meeting again :
My drink is the water, free from all stain."

He stood with his upraised glass, and the light
Full on his fair young brow beamed bright, —
That brow which an anxious mother would kiss
With a pure, deep feeling of heartfelt bliss ;

An Old Man's Prayer.

And along the line of his comrades young,
To honor his toast, each hand upsprung :
In not one glass did the red wine gleam ;
But all were filled from the crystal stream.

On the morrow, adown the street,
With trumpet's blast and war-drum's beat,
Firm and erect, with martial tread,
The flag of their Country overhead,
With brave, stout hearts, and patriot-song,
The Nation's heroes go marching along.
And our soldier is there, marching forth
To join the bands of the loyal North ;
To strike a blow for his Country dear,



An Old Man's Prayer.

And her trailing flag to again uprear.
Light is his heart ; his faith is strong ;
Bright gleams his sword as he moves along :
But the armor he wears shall serve him best
Is the shield of Temperance guarding his breast.















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